

Guide to "Cold Reading"

By Ray Hyman

There are many people who promote themselves as psychics or clairvoyants, and who claim that their powers enable them to read your character, make contact with dead relatives, or provide insights into your life and your future.

Despite their claims, there has never been a successful demonstration of these powers in a laboratory, under properly controlled conditions. Indeed, the National Committee of Australian Skeptics offers a cash prize of \$100,000 for any PROVEN demonstration of such powers.

By far the most common method employed by psychics who have been put to the test is called cold reading. This method involves the psychic reading the subject's body language etc, and skilfully extracting information from the subject, which can then be fed back later, convincing the subject that the psychic has told them things they couldn't possibly have known!

The following is our 13 point guide to cold reading - Study them well, then amaze your friends with your new found psychic powers!

1. Remember that the key ingredient of a successful character reading is confidence.

If you look and act as if you believe in what you are doing, you will be able to sell even a bad reading to most subjects. One danger of playing the role of reader is that you may actually begin to believe that you really are divining your subject's true character!

2. Make creative use of the latest statistical abstracts, polls and surveys.

These can provide you with much information about what various subclasses in our society believe, do, want, worry about etc. For example, if you can ascertain a subject's place of origin, educational level, and his/her parents' religion and vocations, you have gained information which should allow you to predict with high probability his/her voting preferences and attitudes to many subjects.

3. Set the stage for your reading.

Profess a modesty about your talents. Make no excessive claims. You will then catch your subject off guard. You are not challenging them to a battle of wits - You can read his/her character, whether he/she believes you or not.

4. Gain the subject's cooperation in advance.

Emphasise that the success of the reading depends as much on the subject's cooperation as on your efforts. (After all, you imply, you already have a successful career at character reading - You are not on trial, your subject is!) State that due to difficulties of language and communication, you may not always convey the meaning you intend. In these cases, the subject must strive to fit the reading to his/her own life. You accomplish two valuable ends with this dodge - Firstly, you have an alibi in case the reading doesn't click; it's the subject's fault, not yours! Secondly, your subject will strive to fit your generalities to his/her specific life circumstances. Later, when the subject recalls the reading, you will be credited with much more detail than you actually provided! This is crucial. Your reading will only succeed to the degree that the subject is made an active participant in the reading. The good reader is the one who, deliberately or unwittingly, forces the subject to search his/her mind to make sense of your statements.

5. Use a gimmick, such as Tarot cards, crystal ball, palm reading etc.

Use of props serves two valuable purposes. Firstly, it lends atmosphere to the reading. Secondly, (and more importantly) it gives you time to formulate your next question/statement. Instead of just sitting there, thinking of something to say, you can be intently studying the cards /crystal ball etc. You may opt to hold hands with your subject - This will help you feel the subject's reactions to your statements. If you are using, say, palmistry (the reading of hands) it will help if you have studied some manuals, and have learned the terminology. This will allow you to more quickly zero in on your subject's chief concerns - "do you wish to concentrate on the heart line or the wealth line?"

6. Have a list of stock phrases at the tip of your tongue.

Even during a cold reading, a liberal sprinkling of stock phrases will add body to the reading and will help you fill in time while you formulate more precise characterisations. Use them to start your readings. Palmistry, tarot and other fortune telling manuals are a key source of good phrases.

7. Keep your eyes open!

Use your other senses as well. Size the subject up by observing his/her clothes, jewellery, mannerisms and speech. Even a crude classification based on these can provide the basis for a good reading. Also, watch carefully for your subject's response to your statements - You will soon learn when you are hitting the mark!

8. Use the technique of fishing.

This is simply a device to get the subject to tell you about his/herself. Then you rephrase what you have been told and feed it back to the subject.

One way of fishing is to phrase each statement as question, then wait for the reply. If the reply or reaction is positive, then you turn the statement into a positive assertion. Often the subject will respond by answering the implied question and then some. Later, the subject will forget that he/she was the source of the information! By making your statements into questions, you also force the subject to search his/her memory to retrieve specific instances to fit your general statement.

9. Learn to be a good listener.

During the course of a reading your client will be bursting to talk about incidents that are brought up. The good reader allows the client to talk at will. On one occasion I observed a tealeaf reader. The client actually spent 75% of the time talking. Afterward when I questioned the client about the reading she vehemently insisted that she had not uttered a single word during the course of the reading. The client praised the reader for having astutely told her what in fact she herself had spoken.

Another value of listening is that most clients that seek the services of a reader actually want someone to listen to their problems. In addition, many clients have already made up their minds about what choices they are going to make. They merely want support to carry out their decision.

10. Dramatise your reading.

Give back what little information you do have or pick up a little bit at a time. Make it seem more than it is. Build word pictures around each divulgence. Don't be afraid of hamming it up.

11. Always give the impression that you know more than you are saying.

The successful reader, like the family doctor, always acts as if he/she knows much more. Once you have persuaded the subject that you know one item of information that you couldn't possibly have known (through normal channels) the subject will assume that you know all! At this point, the subject will open up and confide in you.

12. Don't be afraid to flatter your subject at every opportunity.

An occasional subject will protest, but will still lap it up. In such cases, you can add, "You are always suspicious of those who flatter you. You just can't believe that someone will say something good about you without an ulterior motive".

13. Remember the Golden Rule - always tell the subject what he/she wants to hear!

<www.skeptics.com.au/journal/coldread.htm>